

Collection Management and Intellectual Freedom

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This paper focuses on a very complicated but important topic: intellectual freedom and how the principles of this basic professional tenet should influence collection management. Before I present an overview of concepts and issues involved in intellectual freedom, let me ask you to take a few minutes to reflect on your own personal experiences with censorship incidents in libraries. Take a look back over your own career and identify any censorship incidents you have witnessed. Try to recall these incidents and describe how you or your library staff handled them. If you have never personally witnessed or been directly involved in a censorship incident, what were the characteristics of your situation that protected you from censorship threats? We will return to your own experiences with threats to intellectual freedom later.

Our library profession's stand on intellectual freedom has not been consistent over the years, and the interpretation of intellectual freedom concepts has always been difficult and controversial. In fact, until the 1930s in this country, many librarians believed that censorship was one of their professional duties. For example, in 1908, American Library Association (ALA) President Arthur Bostwick made the following remark in his inaugural address at the ALA Annual Conference:

"Some are born great; some achieve greatness; some have greatness thrust upon them." It is in this way that the librarian has been a censor of literature. ... Books that distinctly commend what is wrong, that teach how to sin and tell how pleasant sin is, sometimes with and sometimes without the added sauce of impropriety, are increasingly popular, tempting the author to imitate them, and publisher to produce, and the bookseller to exploit. Thank Heaven they do not tempt the librarian.¹

According to ALA President Bostwick, librarians had a responsibility to protect readers from the increasing immorality he observed in the publications of his day.

However, by the late 1930s, ALA's opposition to censorship began to coalesce and be codified. Reacting to numerous attempts to ban John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, ALA in the late 1930s began working on a Library Bill of Rights that, with some additions and revision, is today our profession's basic policy statement on intellectual freedom. The Library Bill of Rights was officially adopted by ALA on June 18, 1948. It has been amended three times by ALA Council: February 2, 1961; June 27, 1967; and January 23, 1980. It reads as follows:

Library Bill of Rights

The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
3. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
4. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.
5. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.
6. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.²

Our profession's interpretation during the last fifty years of the meaning of intellectual freedom as codified in the Library Bill of Rights is a fascinating and enlightening history. I recommend ALA's *Intellectual Freedom Manual* and the other books and articles listed in the selected bibliography at the end of this paper as excellent sources for more information on this history. Let me point out here just two controversial issues related to intellectual freedom to give you at least a flavor of this interesting story.

Article Five of the Library Bill of Rights deals with freedom of access to library resources and services. "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views." The word "age" was added to this article in 1967, and it has caused a great deal of controversy. Do librarians have a responsibility to protect children from adult reading materials of a sensitive nature? In 1972, after much discussion of the question, ALA reaffirmed its strong endorsement of the inclusion of "age" in Article Five "that it is the parent—and only the parent—who may restrict his children—and only *his* children—from access to library materials and services. The parent who would rather his child did not have access to certain materials should so advise the child."³

Several years later librarians were still arguing about this issue. In a 1979 *Library Journal* article, critical of the "purist" and "absolutist" positions taken in the Library Bill of Rights, John C. Swan wrote: "Presumably, the parent who insists upon becoming involved in this dirty business should not look to the librarian, whose only concern here is to 'provide, provide.' Little Freddie should be able to walk out of the library with *Joy of Sex* just as easily as with *Where the Wild Things Are*, and if he chooses the former, the matter is entirely between Freddie and his parents."⁴

This position of neutrality—or "provide, provide" mentality as John Swan called it—required by the Library Bill of Rights leads us to another area of controversy related to intellectual freedom. Should librarians, their institutions, or their professional associations advocate or remain silent on social or political issues? In 1971 ALA took a stand against the war in Vietnam and in 1974 it endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment. Critics of these advocacy positions have used the concept of intellectual freedom in support of their arguments. Terence L. Day, a public library trustee, wrote, "Adoption of advocacy positions and participation in

boycotts cannot help but strike a blow at the public's confidence in the fair-mindedness and even-handedness of librarians."⁵ In a more recent incident, in September 1985, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reported that the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was accusing the Cleveland Public Library of censorship for its new policy of refusing to buy books from publishers with subsidiaries in South Africa.⁶ And how to deal with South Africa is still an issue of concern within ALA.

These issues indicate the difficulty and complexity of interpreting and applying intellectual freedom concepts. There is a fine, some might say "fuzzy," line between proper restraint and censorship. Democracy is a delicate balance of individual freedom and community welfare. What for one person might be proper restraint or appropriate advocacy might for another person be a clear case of censorship.

Self-Censorship and Collection Development

The boundaries that separate censorship from the selection of library materials also are hard to define. And this brings me to a major concern: the difference between self-censorship and collection development. Did you, when I asked you earlier to think about a censorship incident, come up with examples of self-censorship? Probably not. We, of course, are librarians who fight censorship and believe fervently in intellectual freedom. But let me tell you that I think self-censorship is a common, subtle, and difficult problem for librarians working in all types of libraries. In 1982, L. B. Woods and Claudia Perry-Holmes reported in *Library Journal* the results of a survey they conducted of controversial material held by public libraries. They concluded that the holdings figures from the survey, particularly for small and medium-sized public libraries, suggested that librarians were often avoiding controversial works.⁷

At the Association of College and Research Libraries Conference in Baltimore in 1986, Elizabeth Hood made a similar observation about self-censorship in an academic library. She asked a number of library selectors in an academic library to consider a controversial book for addition to the collection. The book was Derek Humphry's *Let Me Die before I Wake: Hemlock's Guide to Self-Deliverance for the Dying*. What she found was that "everyone had an opinion, but not one cited the collection development policy." According to Hood, "With little exception, these librarians were making a selection decision based upon their own social, moral, and political interests and their feelings of personal responsibility for the use of their library collections."⁸

Article Two of the Library Bill of Rights states that "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues." We try to build balanced collections, but we cannot buy everything. We have neither the money nor the space for that, so we must make choices, selecting certain titles while rejecting others. But what differentiates selection from self-censorship? I can recommend two strategies to you to help avoid self-censorship.

Strategies for Avoiding Self-Censorship

First, I think that too much concentration on the selection activity of collection management can lead to censorship. Eric Moon makes this point in his work *Book Selection and Censorship in the Sixties*. According to Moon, "The principal reason why shelf collections are so frequently inadequate in meeting readers' needs is that the book selection process stops too early, operates too much in limbo." "Rare is a library," says Moon, "where trained personnel are assigned full-time to the care and study of the book collection and its usage."⁹ In other words, we

can only avoid our own prejudices in the selection process when we put that process in the context of a complete, well-organized collection management program. We have to put into practice the lessons of this institute. We must know our collections, we must know our users, and we must have a carefully planned collection policy if we are to select the most appropriate and useful material for our libraries.

The second way we can prevent selection from turning into censorship is by keeping in mind the basic attitudinal differences between the selector and the censor. ALA's Library Bill of Rights and *Intellectual Freedom Manual* can give us guidance in this area, as can Lester Asheim's 1953 essay entitled "Not Censorship, But Selection."¹⁰ Asheim says that the all-important difference between the two activities is that the selector's approach is positive, while the censor's is negative. The selector favors liberty of thought, while the censor favors thought control. The selector looks for the values in a book and examines the book in its whole context. The censor seeks vulnerable characteristics wherever they may be found—in the book or outside. The censor, for example, rejects *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for its passages using racist language, while the selector accepts this masterpiece of American literature that in its entirety reaffirms the humanity of all people. Finally, the selector has faith in the intelligence of his patrons, while the censor has faith only in his or her own intelligence.

By approaching our responsibilities with the right frame of mind and by hard work in all areas of collection management, I believe we can avoid the mistake of self-censorship.

Handling External Censorship Threats

Let us turn briefly now to the problem of external censorship threats. Let us look at some of your own examples and see what lessons we can draw from them. Most external censorship threats appear to revolve around four types of issues: sexual propriety, political views, religious beliefs, and minority rights. Do your examples fall into these categories?

Do you think external censorship threats are declining or increasing? According to the 1985 annual report of the People for the American Way, a group that monitors school censorship, threats to intellectual freedom were up thirty-seven percent over 1984. The group stated, "Not only were there more censorship incidents reported than in the last two years, but more than forty percent of the incidents resulted in instructional materials being removed or restricted."¹¹ All of us were shocked by the threats against Salmon Rushdie's life and those of booksellers who made his novel *The Satanic Verses* available. And we are witnessing a major censorship controversy involving members of the United States Congress and the National Endowment for the Arts over works by Robert Mapplethorpe and others. Since the early 1980s the American Library Association has been issuing an annual chronology of government restrictions on access to information. Entitled *Less Access to Less Information by and about the U.S. Government*, the latest edition provides a chronology of restrictions from 1981 to 1987.¹² There seems, then, to be no end to controversy over or threats to intellectual freedom. There appears to be no easy way to achieve that delicate balance between individual freedom of expression and community standards and welfare.

How do you prepare for and deal with censorship threats? ALA's *Intellectual Freedom Manual* gives excellent advice on what to do before a censor comes to your library and what procedures to follow if a censorship threat actually occurs.¹³ To prepare, ALA recommends that each library have a collection development policy and maintain a clearly defined method for handling complaints from clientele about the collection. Lines of communications with community groups should be established and ongoing, and librarians should use effective public

relations on behalf of intellectual freedom. If a censorship threat does occur, ALA advises staff to remain calm and to communicate quickly the nature of the incident to library administrators and the governing board. Librarians should seek support from the press and local civic organizations in defending the principles of intellectual freedom. Librarians should always let the courts interpret law and issue orders if library material is to be removed. And finally, librarians should inform ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom about such incidents. You do not have to face censorship threats alone. There are many sources of community and professional assistance available to you.

Notes

1. Arthur E. Bostwick, "The Librarian as Censor," *ALA Bulletin* 2 (Sept. 1908): 113.
2. "Library Bill of Rights," in *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 3d ed. (Chicago: American Library Assn., 1989), 14.
3. *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 19.
4. John C. Swan, "Librarianship Is Censorship," *Library Journal* 104 (1 Oct. 1979): 2040-43.
5. Terence L. Day, chairman, Neil Public Library Board of Trustees, "Letter to the Editor," *Chicago Tribune*, 21 Jan. 1979.
6. "Cleveland's Apartheid Stand Draws Flak From the ACLU," *Library Journal* 113 (1 Nov. 1985): 14.
7. L. B. Woods and Claudia Perry-Holmes, "The Flak if We Had *The Joy of Sex* Here," *Library Journal* 107 (15 Sept. 1982): 1711-15.
8. Elizabeth Hood, "Academic Library Censorship in a Conservative Era," in *Energies for Transition: Proceedings of the Fourth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries*, Baltimore, Maryland, Apr 9-12, 1986 (Chicago: Assn. of College and Research Libraries, 1986), 16.
9. Eric Moon. "The Blue and the Grey: Theory and Practice in Book Selection," in *Book Selection and Censorship in the Sixties* (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1969), 11.
10. Lester E. Asheim, "The Librarian's Responsibility: Not Censorship, But Selection," in *Freedom of Book Selection: Proceedings of the Second Conference on Intellectual Freedom*, Whittier, California, June 20-21, 1953 (Chicago: American Library Assn., 1954), 90-99.
11. "New Study Charts Growth in Censorship," *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* 34 (Nov. 1985): 187.
12. *Less Access to Less Information by and about the U.S. Government: A 1981-1987 Chronology* (Washington, D.C.: American Library Assn., Washington Office, 1987).
13. *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 167-92.

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